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OCT 6 1993

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A GUIDE FOR HOME RULE CHARTER COMMISSIONS

COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

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revised March 1992

931/200

INTRODUCTION:

Service on a city or town charter commission can be a fulfilling opportunity for public service. However, commission members initially have questions regarding membership on the commission, operating procedures, the extent of the commission's authority, etc. This booklet has been prepared to provide guidance on the concerns most frequently raised by newly elected commission members. The purpose of the guide is to serve as a practical general reference document. It is not intended, and should not be used, as a substitute for any legal consultation that the commission may require in the course of its work. It may be helpful to commission members as a companion to The Home Rule Amendment and the Home Rule Procedures Act, and Summary of Home Rule Charter Provisions in Massachusetts, also available from the Executive Office of Communities and Development.

The text is divided into several sections:

I. MEMBERSHIP addresses questions raised regarding term of office, vacancies, and conflict of interest matters.

II. THE COMMISSION'S CALENDAR reviews the timetable considerations of charter preparation and presentation.

III. OPERATING PROCEDURES serves to guide the commission on questions of public notice and public hearing requirements. This section also offers several suggestions regarding the conduct of meetings.

IV. DELIBERATIONS* briefly reviews the types of decisions charter commissions face in the course of their deliberations, and suggests sources of information for commissions.

V. PRESENTING THE CHARTER* discusses public education and information efforts that may be used to introduce the proposed charter to the voters.

* these sections may also be helpful to town government study committees considering the preparation of special act charters.

NOTE: References throughout the text to the Home Rule Rule Procedures Act and other state laws will be made by citing the appropriate General Laws of Massachusetts (G.L.M.), most often Chapter 43B (c. 43B) followed by the appropriate section (s. #).

I. MEMBERSHIP

WHO SERVES ON THE CHARTER COMMISSION?

The nine candidates receiving the highest number of votes at the municipal election where the vote for establishing a commission to frame/revise the charter is affirmative are sworn in to serve as the charter commission. No charter commission seats are "reserved" for elected or appointed officials; however, there is no prohibition in the law preventing officials from serving on the commission. NOTE: Charter commission members are specifically exempt from the state's "conflict of interest" statute.

(See G.L.M., c. 268A, s. 1[g])

WHAT IS THE TERM OF OFFICE FOR CHARTER COMMISSION MEMBERS?

The term of charter commission members begins on the day of their election; the term of office ends 30 days following the vote on the proposed charter (see G.L. M., c. 43B, s. 7). NOTE: Local bylaws setting a certain date for terms of office do not apply to charter commissions, since the office is not established or required locally, but is defined by the state constitution (see Articles of Amendment to the State Constitution, Article 89, "The Home Rule Amendment.")

WHAT IF A CHARTER COMMISSION MEMBER RESIGNS FROM OFFICE OR IS OTHERWISE UNABLE TO SERVE?

G..L.M., c. 43B, s. 7 states that the remaining members of the charter commission may vote to fill any vacancies on the commission, or may proceed without the full complement of nine members.

When there is an opening, some commissions vote for the individual receiving the 10th highest vote at the election of the charter commission to fill the vacancy. This is an option for any commission to consider, but it is not a requirement.

II. THE CHARTER COMMISSION'S CALENDAR

WHAT IS THE TIMETABLE FOR CHARTER PREPARATION?

The Home Rule Amendment provides a maximum of 18 months for a commission to produce a proposed charter (also referred to as a final report). Prior to 1978, when the timeline requirements were amended, charter commissions had to produce the final report within 10 months.

It is important to note that 18 months is the maximum time allowed; many charter commissions produce the final report in less time, provided required publication deadlines are met.

In towns, it is common practice for commissions to produce the final report within 10 months of their election. A 10-month schedule allows the electorate to vote on the proposed charter within one year (12 months) after the commission was elected. In cities, which have biennial elections, using the 18 month schedule allows the question of charter adoption to appear on the ballot the second year following the commission's election.

THE 10 MONTH SCHEDULE:

To meet the provisions of the Home Rule Amendment and the Home Rule Procedures Act (G.L.M., c. 43B), the practical considerations of the **10 month schedule** include:

- preparation and publication of a preliminary report by the eighth month following election;
- holding a public hearing on the preliminary report within four weeks of its publication;
- submitting the final report to the city council/board of selectmen by the 10th month following election. The council/board is required to issue the election order. This is a procedural function of the board/council; however, the charter commission must assure that the receipt of the report by council/board and issuance of the election order is accomplished two months before the election. (See G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 11).
- distribution of the final report is the responsibility of the board of selectmen/city council. However, the board/council may direct the necessary funding for this task to the commission and request that the members manage this effort.

The commission's calendar must necessarily provide time for preparation of copy for publication of the preliminary report in a newspaper of general circulation, and production and distribution of the final report to every household in the municipality with at least one registered voter.

Most commissions set out a calendar working backward from the date of the following year's election to determine the appropriate timetable. See example below of a 10 month-preparation schedule:

<u>DATE:</u>	<u>EVENT:</u>
on: April 5, 1991	CHARTER COMMISSION ELECTED
by: May 20, 1991	initial public hearing held
- - -	research and preparation - - -
by: December 6, 1991	preliminary report published in newspaper
by: January 3, 1992	public hearing on preliminary report held
by: February 7, 1992	final report must be presented to council or board of selectmen.
on: April 6, 1992	ANNUAL TOWN ELECTION/VOTE ON CHARTER PROPOSAL

III. OPERATING PROCEDURES

CONDUCTING THE FIRST PUBLIC HEARING:

Within 45 days of the commission's election, the commission must schedule and conduct a public hearing. The hearing notice should follow the standard set for similar bodies, e.g., the notice should appear as a "legal notice" in a newspaper of general circulation at least 10 days before the hearing is held. The date, time, and place for the hearing should be clearly stated.

(See G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 9 [d])

Notice to Officials

It is accepted practice to send written notice of the hearing to the municipality's elected and appointed officials. The notice should include a statement that the commission will accept written testimony if the official is unable to attend the hearing.

Notice to the Public

Charter commissions may use a variety of ways to notify citizens of the public hearing, including --

- notice posted in public buildings (town hall, library)
- articles in local newspapers
- notice in neighborhood or civic group newsletters
- notice to local radio stations (public service announcement).

Such efforts supplement the legal notice requirement, but do not substitute for it.

Scheduling the Hearing

If possible, the commission should schedule the hearing on a weekday evening that offers the least conflict with regularly scheduled meetings of other boards.

MEETINGS OF THE COMMISSION

How Often?

Most commissions seeking to complete the charter preparation process in one year usually meet weekly. Those on the 18-month schedule may meet bi-weekly for the initial months of operation, although some find it necessary to meet weekly as the deadline for publishing the preliminary report draws closer.

Applicable state laws:

Meetings of the charter commission are subject to the provisions of the state's open meeting law (G.L.M., c. 39, ss. 23A, B, and C). Notice of meetings must be posted and accommodations made for citizens to attend. (NOTE: Several commissions have allowed an open forum at the beginning of each meeting so that citizens in attendance could speak on issues of concern.)

Additional hearings:

The charter commission may schedule additional public hearings as it determines to be necessary or helpful; keep in mind that any public hearing must meet the legal notice requirement as referenced above (see FIRST PUBLIC HEARING, p. 4)

FUNDING:

G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 8(b) states:

"Within twenty days after the election of a charter commission, the city or town treasurer shall credit to the account of the charter commission, with or without appropriation, the (following): "

<u>Population</u>	<u>Funding</u>
under 12,000	\$ 2,000
12,000 - 49,999	5,000
50,000 - 99,999	7,500
100,000 +	10,000

The statute also allows "a city or town [to] appropriate such additional funds for its charter commission as is deemed necessary."

The only specific expense of the charter commission identified in c. 43B is the cost associated with the newspaper publication of the preliminary report.

NOTE: The city council/board of selectmen is responsible for printing and distribution of the commission's final report. (See G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 11)

However, many charter commissions seek additional funding for:

- o legal consultation/ drafting assistance;
- o research and analysis of alternatives, e.g.,
 - features of other charters;
 - approaches to department consolidation;
 - the transition from elected to appointed officials in certain positions; and
 - the practical effects of charter implementation.

IV. DELIBERATIONS

(NOTE: The following discussion will highlight the charter features which are often the subject of discussion and deliberation. This is not a comprehensive discussion of all charter features.)

Elect or appoint: A charter provides the basic framework for the local government structure. Commissions should be initially guided by G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 20 which sets broad parameters for changes which can be made by adoption or revision of a home rule charter.

Section 20 identifies those offices which must be elected:

- mayor/board of selectmen
- representative legislative body (representative town meeting members, city council, town council)
- school committee
- moderator (if legislative body is open town meeting)

All other offices, boards, and commissions, which have traditionally been elected, may be either elected or appointed. Boards and commissions must be composed of an odd number of members, serving an odd number of years (maximum term: five years).

Appointment powers: Appointment powers of a board of selectmen may be assumed by an administrative officer (e.g., town manager/administrator, executive secretary, or similar position).

Department consolidation: Charter commissions may propose consolidation of departments and agencies. For example, charters adopted in 22 communities included provisions to create a consolidated department of public works. The commission may also wish to review G.L.M., c. 43C, which provides consolidation plans for (1) municipal finance functions, (2) inspection and code enforcement, and (3) community development.

Creating a Chief Administrative Position or Modifying the Present

Position: Almost every home rule charter makes specific provisions for an administrative/management position. The charter usually outlines the qualifications, duties, authority, and responsibilities of such a position. Some also include criteria for recruitment and selection (e.g., establishing a citizen committee to review applications and recommend potential candidates to be interviewed).

Some considerations re: What's in a name?

Given the variety of titles in use for local management positions and the limited definitions provided by state law, it is not possible to state any general "rules" regarding treatment of such positions in a home rule charter. However, the following considerations may be helpful as a guide:

a) **administrative assistants** generally have few specific powers; most decision-making responsibility for both policy and administration remains with the board of selectmen.

b) **executive secretaries** have limited independent authority in some administrative areas -- e.g., purchasing, personnel management, coordination of the budget preparation process. The bulk of decision-making authority remains with the board of selectmen. There are many varied exceptions to this premise. Dependent upon the amount of centralization in the local government structure, the executive secretary may oversee all town department heads and appoint employees. Much is determined by when the position was initially created, how the role has evolved over time, and the current job description for the position.

c) **town administrators/town managers:** such positions usually have some independent authority to oversee and direct the town's administrative and service operations. They may have authority to appoint some boards, commissions and officials as well as employees. They usually have a more central role in the budget preparation process and may have the authority for coordination and oversight of all financial management functions. Here again, exceptions to these premises are plentiful. Some positions with this title more closely resemble an executive secretary position, while others are referenced as "strong," usually meaning that the position has a fair amount of discretion and independent decision-making authority.

Budget procedures: Most charters include a description of the budget preparation and review process, outlining a time frame and assigning responsibility for presentation of the proposed budget. Several charters adopted recently include provisions requiring coordination of the budget preparation process with the school committee and school superintendent. Others include a requirement that the manager prepare a "financial forecast," anticipating future costs and service demands. (see, for example, the home rule charter adopted in Barnstable [1989]).

A majority of charters require the preparation of a capital plan to identify major infrastructure or capital equipment needs, determine a process for setting priorities among proposed capital projects, and recommend financing strategies.

Transition provisions: The transition provisions of a charter describe the steps to be taken to change the government structure from its present form to the form described in the charter if it is adopted. The following considerations may be helpful to the commission's deliberations in this area:

- Change from elected to appointed position: it is general practice to allow an elected official or members of an elected body to complete the term for which they were elected before instituting an appointment procedure required by the charter. Several charters have included "grandfathering" provisions, allowing the present incumbent (e.g., town treasurer, town clerk) to remain in the office until he/she chooses to resign or retire before the charter's appointment provisions take effect. (See, for example, the transition provisions in home rule charters adopted in Chelmsford [1989] and Sutton [1988].)
- Consolidating departments: The charter may include a timetable for consolidation and/or recommend the creation of an implementation committee to design and oversee the department consolidation. The charter may specify a certain date (e.g., one year after charter adoption) for consolidation provisions to take effect.
- Administrative position: The charter may prescribe a timeframe for recruitment and hiring. It may also clarify whether the present administrator can be a candidate for the position described in the charter. If a decision is made that the incumbent administrator shall not be a candidate for the new position, the charter should include a provision for termination of the present position, possibly with an extension clause allowing the present administrator to continue in office for an additional two to three months if the recruitment and selection process for the new administrator is delayed. A timetable for a phased assumption of duties by the new administrator may be provided.

- Disposition of special acts: Some charters list those special acts affecting the town's governing structure which are specifically retained, and those no longer in effect upon charter adoption. This step does provide more clarity to those offices, boards, and commissions which had been created by the special act process.

Sources of information for charter commissions:

The most frequently used sources of information for charter commissions include:

- the community's "legal base" or "existing charter" -- a compilation of state law requirements, state enabling legislation, "special acts" enacted upon petition of the community to the state legislature, and local bylaws or ordinances with organizational implications, i.e., those provisions which determine the current government structure.
- home rule or "special act" charters adopted in other communities (available from city/town clerks or the Massachusetts Executive Office of Communities and Development which maintains a repository of all proposed home rule charters).
- proposals of prior charter commissions in the community, if any, and/or reports of city/town government study committees. May also include studies or reports by the League of Women Voters or other civic groups in the community.
- meetings or interviews with elected and appointed officials from municipalities operating under a home rule or special act charter.
- publications and reference materials from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Communities and Development.

In addition, some commissions have designed and distributed surveys seeking information from local officials and employees to determine areas of concern regarding the current local government structure.

V. PRESENTING THE PROPOSED CHARTER

- Distribution of the Final Report (Proposed Charter)

As required by the Home Rule Procedures Act (G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 11), the charter commission's final report must be distributed to every household with at least one registered voter.

● What to include in the Final Report:

The main body of the final report is the full text of the proposed charter.

The document must also include (see G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 11):

- description of the major differences between the current form of government and that proposed by the charter commission;
- explanation of the major features of the proposed charter (e.g., legislative body, chief elected official, creation/modification of the management position);
- a minority report "if any, provided such statement is filed within forty-eight hours of the commission's vote approving the [final] report." (Minority report is limited to 1,000 words). (See G.L.M., c. 43B, s. 9 [c]).

Some charter commissions have also chosen to include:

- text of the ballot question on charter adoption.
- a brief description of commission meetings and preparation process.
- a majority report.

NOTE: The ballot question includes a brief summary of the proposed charter's major features. See summary of ballot question for the Ashland home rule charter (adopted, 1987) below:

"Shall the town approve the new charter recommended by the charter commission, summarized below?"

Summary: If adopted, the proposed charter would: (1) automatically establish Home Rule; (2) retain the open town meeting; (3) establish the position of Town Manager, with responsibility to oversee and coordinate the daily management of the town's business including budget preparation and personnel administration; (4) provide for the election of the Board of Selectmen, School Committee, Moderator, Board of Health, the Assessors, Planning Board, Library Trustees, Recreation Commission and Housing Authority; (5) provide for strengthened budget procedures; (6) retain the right of voters to recall elected officials; (7) allow for reorganization and consolidation of town agencies by town meeting vote, via bylaw.

Public information strategies

In addition to distribution of the final report, charter commission members may wish to consider the following avenues for increasing voter awareness of the ballot question on charter adoption:

- attendance by commission members at meetings of social, civic, or neighborhood organizations;
- organizing a "question and answer" session on the proposed charter at the local library;
- preparation of "letters to the editor" or similar columns in the local newspapers.

Such efforts need to be coordinated by the commission to ensure that members are available to attend meetings, voter forums, or similar events. In most instances, the local press will provide sufficient coverage on the proposed charter to serve as an important vehicle for voter information, although the commission should not discount additional strategies to encourage voter participation.

Resubmission of a defeated charter:

A proposed charter which is defeated may appear on the ballot at the following regular election (within two years) provided the following conditions are met:

- charter proposal received minimum of 35 per cent (35%) affirmative vote in the initial election; and
- petition requesting resubmission of the proposal is signed by 10 per cent (10%) of the municipality's registered voters.

This option was exercised by the voters of Greenfield; the charter was defeated in its initial appearance on the ballot in 1981, but was adopted when resubmitted to the voters in 1983. The text of the petition requesting resubmission of the question appears below:

"Each of the undersigned requests that the charter submitted to the town of Greenfield as Question #1 on the April 6, 1981 ballot be resubmitted to the voters in accordance with the provisions of M.G.L. [Massachusetts General Laws], c. 43B, s. 12A at the next annual town election for the election of town officers, and each of the undersigned certifies that he/she is a registered voter of said town whose residence addresses at the time set forth below were as shown below, and that he/she has not signed this petition more than once."

Submission of multiple questions:

Several charter commissions have presented alternative proposals to the voters, producing two complete charters for consideration. This approach was taken in Methuen in 1979, where the charter commission asked voters to choose between a mayor-council government, and a town council-manager government; in 1989, the Plymouth charter commission presented the options of a town council-manager plan or a representative town meeting-board of selectmen structure. In Methuen, the town council plan received majority voter acceptance; in Plymouth, neither plan received majority acceptance.

It does not appear that the framers of Chapter 43B anticipated the possibility that more than one charter proposal could be considered by the voters at a single election. (References throughout C. 43B are to the "charter proposal.") However, it has generally been held that the submission of multiple proposals must meet the same standards of presentation as are required for one proposal -- i.e., full text of each alternative proposal, statement of difference between each proposal and the present form of government, etc. (see C. 43B, s.11).

Some charter commissions have debated the question of submitting more than one proposal and decided against it, believing that the voters' expectation was for the commission to engage in the necessary deliberation and debate in order to recommend a plan of government for the community. Others have decided to present multiple proposals because of differences of opinion among the commission's membership, and/or the belief that the voters should have sufficient opportunity to consider the "pros and cons" of alternative forms and have the right to make the choice.

ATTACHMENTS:

- CITIES AND TOWNS OPERATING UNDER HOME RULE CHARTERS
- TABLE OF CONTENTS: GRAFTON HOME RULE CHARTER (adopted 1987).

COMMUNITIES OPERATING UNDER HOME RULE CHARTERS

CITIES:

MAYOR - COUNCIL

Agawam (1) Leominster
Attleboro Lynn
Gloucester Newton

COUNCIL - MANAGER

Worcester *Methuen (2)
*Barnstable (2) *Southbridge
*Franklin *Watertown
*Greenfield (3)

TOWNS:

REPRESENTATIVE TOWN MEETING - BOARD OF SELECTMEN - MANAGER

Amesbury Dedham Plymouth Swampscott (5)
Auburn Easthampton Reading Walpole
Billerica (2) Falmouth Seekonk Webster
Chelmsford Natick Stoughton Winchester

OPEN TOWN MEETING - BOARD OF SELECTMEN - MANAGER

Abington Easton Medfield Norwell Stow
Acton (4) Grafton Middleton Orleans Sturbridge (2)
Acushnet Harwich Millis (5) Oxford Sutton
Ashland Hudson (2) North Andover Palmer Wareham
Bedford Lynnfield North Reading Provincetown (2) Wellfleet
Blackstone Mansfield Northborough Rockland (5) Westborough
Dracut Marshfield Northbridge Salisbury Westwood
Eastham Maynard Norton Scituate Winchendon

TOWNS WITH CHARTER COMMISSIONS AS OF 2/92: Truro - to vote in spring '92
Sturbridge - to vote in spring '93
Webster - to vote in spring '92

NOTES

(1) Originally adopted town council-manager charter in 1971; in 1988, town secured passage of a special act replacing the appointed manager with an elected mayor (2 year term).

(2) towns have adopted more than one home rule charter.

(3) charter also provides for election of a five-member board of selectmen.

(4) town had been operating under provisions of a special act charter prior to home rule charter adoption.

(5) charters do not provide for management position, although Millis has an administrative assistant position, and Rockland created an executive secretary position in 1987.

* communities listed generally referenced as towns, although they have adopted a "city" form of government.

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